February 13, 2019

Sent via Email only: RBowers@azleg.gov

The Honorable Russell Bowers
Speaker of the House
Arizona House of Representatives
1700 W. Washington
Room 223
Phoenix AZ 85007

Re: House invocations show divisiveness of religion mixed with government

Dear Speaker Bowers:

I am writing on behalf of members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, to object to the House's opening invocation practice. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization, which works to protect the constitutional separation of state and church. FFRF represents more than 31,000 nonreligious members nationally including more than 800 members in Arizona and a local Valley of the Sun chapter.

We understand that on Feb. 11, Rep. Athena Salman delivered an invocation that included a call to reflect on the complexity of the natural world:

> Take a moment to reflect on the wonders of the universe. Bask in the awe and magnificence of the diversity of nature…No matter what we may call it, we give thanks to the awe and inspiring power of nature itself.

After these positive words, Rep. John Kavanagh was given the floor to mock and disparage Rep. Salman's invocation:

> Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce my guest: God. God is in the gallery, as He is everywhere. And the same God who, by the way, *created nature*, which purportedly created this tiny speck of a planet in which this tiny speck of a legislature legislates.

We write to again point out that the history of divisiveness and disparagement non-Christian invocations engender in the Arizona House is precisely why the founders chose to keep religion and government separate.

This is the fourth letter FFRF has written to this body. In April 2017 Rep. Salman gave an invocation that invoked our shared humanity, after which the floor was given to Rep. Finchem who complained that her words were not a "request for help from God" as required by House

rules and then offered a second invocation "in Jesus' name." In March 2016 we wrote because after months of being barred,[1] Rep. Juan Mendez was allowed to rise and give a secular invocation. Rep. Mendez did not mention a deity in his prayer, and Rep. Montenegro called upon Rev. Mark Mucklow to deliver another prayer, presumably one that he found more in line with his personal religious beliefs as a Christian.

Similarly in 2013 the day after Rep. Mendez delivered an invocation, it was found necessary to deliver not just one but two Christian prayers. Rep. Steve Smith gave the second 2013 prayer "for repentance of yesterday," referring to Mendez's invocation.[2]

House members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. They do not need to worship on taxpayers' time. The House ought not lend its power and prestige to religion by enforcing praying. Our nation is founded on a godless Constitution, whose only references to religion in government are exclusionary, such as "no religious test shall ever be required" for public office. U.S. Const. art. VI. The United States was the first nation to adopt a secular constitution, investing sovereignty in "We the People," not a divine entity. The framers did not think it necessary to pray during the four-month Constitutional Convention. We fail to see why it is necessary for the House to pray to complete its daily business.

Overall, 23% Americans identify as nonreligious.[3] That 8 point increase since 2007[4] and 15 point jump since 1990 makes the "nones" the fastest growing identification in America.[5] Nationally, about 35% of millennials are nonreligious.[6] If the House wishes to hear Christian prayers, it must also be prepared to hear Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Native American, and yes, even atheist invocations. And it should be prepared to hear a lot more non-Christian prayers. The House cannot adopt a policy that each meeting must begin with a prayer deemed acceptable by Christian Representatives, nor can it engage in a pattern of disparaging nonreligious or non-Christian invocations. The House must accept whatever form the invocation takes, or it must do away with the practice altogether.

Finally, Rep. Kavanagh and those legislators who laughed as he mocked another member's religion would do well to remember that Jesus was suspicious of people who need to be seen publicly praying. He condemns public prayer as hypocrisy in the Sermon on the Mount:

> And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. Matthew 6:5-6.

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[1] Nick Wing, "Atheist Lawmaker Says He's Not Allowed To Lead Official Prayer Because He Won't Invoke God," *Huffington Post*, Feb. 11, 2016.
[2] Howard Fisher, "Arizona legislators spar over use of daily prayer time," *East Valley Tribune*, May 22, 2013.
[3] *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), *available at* www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.
[4] *Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*, THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE (October 9, 2012), *available at* http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx.
[5] Barry Kosmin, *National Religious Identification Survey* 1989-1990.
[6] *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), *available at* www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

We urge the House to drop prayers altogether. It will create a more inclusive, productive environment for everyone and avoid the hypocrisy of public piety. If the House continues to insist on prayers, it has no power or authority to regulate the content of those opening remarks or to continue a pattern of disparaging nonreligion.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Cavell
Freedom From Religion Foundation